Philip Butterss, An Unsentimental Bloke: The life and work of C.J. Dennis (Wakefield Press, 2014)

If I recall correctly, my farmer father on South Australia’s Eyre Peninsula enjoyed the ‘Ben Bowyang’ cartoons which appeared weekly in the Adelaide Chronicle in the 1950s. ‘Ben Bowyang’ was one of the later creations of renowned popular poet C.J. Dennis, who as Philip Butterss’s excellent new biography shows, was himself originally a country boy from rural South Australia, and is now regarded as one of the State’s more significant literary figures. However as Butterss’s title has it, he was not, as the title of his most famous verse has it, ‘a sentimental bloke’. His was to be a more complicated character.

It was a surprise too to learn that C.J. Dennis remains Australia’s most popular and financially successful poet, due to his larrikin verse dating from the early twentieth century, especially The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke (1915) and The Moods of Ginger Mick (1916). These titles have sold phenomenally well over time, and are still available today. Even so, the flow of Dennis’s career had its ups and downs. Maybe, Butterss concludes, conflicting aspects of his personality were integral to his output and popularity (222).

Clarence Michael James Clement Dennis was born in Auburn in the South Australia’s picturesque Lower North in 1876. He spent his first 21 years in that area, where his father was a hotelkeeper, mostly somewhat further north, at Laura. The Dennis family was of Irish and Roman Catholic origin, which no doubt accounts in good part for the young C.J.’s unsettled youth, along with an unsympathetic father. Fortunately for the young Dennis, he would find his feet in the tiny world of Adelaide’s radical journalism at the turn of the century. There, as Butters puts it, ‘he learned to write in different voices’ (30).

In 1907 Dennis left Adelaide for Melbourne, where he worked until his death in 1938 aged 62. As early as 1908, long-term Melbourne colleague and poet Hal Gye introduced him to Toolangi, a small village in the Victorian mountain country north of Healesville, his haven thereafter; and although success did not come quickly, he soon found his way into Melbourne’s much larger Bohemian culture. Moreover – and tracing this is one of the strengths of Butterss’s biography – a major transformation was soon underway in his work, from radical to populist verse, to be manifest five years later in the publication of Backblock Ballads and other verses, by Melbourne’s radical bookseller E.W. Cole in 1913. The book included a cover by New Zealand-born artist ‘Dave’ (David) Low, thereafter a close friend and later an internationally renowned cartoonist in London.

Dennis’s persona was changing too. Reared at Laura by single aunts, according to previous biographer A.R. Chisholm as ‘a little Lord Fauntleroy’, he was on his way to the larrikinese that made his name with The Songs of the Sentimental Bloke and The Moods of Ginger Mick. In 1917, to the surprise of his friends, aged 40 he married Tasmanian-born Olive Price, who outlived him by thirty years, having become a writer herself. In this biography we get a clearer picture of the marriage, a subject barely touched upon by previous biographers.

Just as 1901 is a key reference point in the life of Miles Franklin, so the years 1915-16 must be deemed pivotal in any account of the life and work of C.J. Dennis. In a well-structured work of fifteen chapters, the last two of which deal with the afterlife of Dennis and his writings, Butters places these years at chapters six to eight. There he discusses the creation, publication and enthusiastic reception of The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke and The Moods of Ginger Mick. In a neat and powerful summation, these two works in the vernacular made him ‘the laureate of the larrikin’ and ‘the laureate of the Anzacs’.

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The year 1916 was the pinnacle of Dennis’s career (121). Even so, he continued to write poetry until the mid-1920s, when he became a literary editor at the Melbourne Herald. By then, his ‘larrikinese’ was becoming increasingly out-of-date, and sales figures declined. Of this, the ‘unsentimental bloke’ of the book’s title was well aware; and the danger of heavy drinking which had dogged him from his young days, again loomed. What probably saved him was his high profile, and the translation of his best-loved work into other genres, such as film: Raymond Longford’s ‘The Sentimental Bloke’ (1919) is now regarded as a classic of the silent film era (149). In fact, Dennis’s work did mostly still sell quite well: a print run of even 2,000 copies of a new title would satisfy most poets these days. Moreover, he had regular job, and a manageable marriage. It should also be noted that some of the later fictions are evidently of considerable interest, for example the reflections of ‘Digger Smith’ and ‘Jim of the Hills’.

Two (very different) aspects of Dennis’s approach to emerge from this biography will be of wider interest: first, his use of language, and, second, the historical significance of his World War I writing with its insight into the digger mentality. Regarding language, in 1915 Dennis began compiling (but never completed) a ‘Dictionary of Australian Slang’, a subject of increasing interest to linguists but too time-consuming for a creative writer (47). This is a pity because of his command of the contemporary vernacular there can be little doubt. Regarding his wartime writing, it serves not only as a pointer to an increasingly conservative personal approach to life but as a message for troubled times: *The Sentimental Bloke* was ‘a deeply unifying text’ in 1915, and its sequel in *Ginger Mick* captured the transition from bush to city larrikin (147). In my view, the latter of these two subjects has not yet received its scholarly due in Australia.

Readers will find much of interest in this book. It is highly informative and well written, with suitable scholarly supports in the form of a select bibliography, notes, and an index. It is also well produced, with 19 graphics, some in colour. C.J. Dennis may not to be everyone’s taste today, but his place in Australian literary history is assured and strengthened by the thorough and thoughtful treatment provided here. Butterss’s book will be the standard biography of the poet for many years to come.

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